



PROFITING FROM DESIGN

JODY SHILAN

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Competing with value, not price

Q Many companies offer “free drawings” to get installation work. We’ve always charged for our landscape plans, but often lose work because of this. What can we do?

— **Bill Smith**, Greenscapes Unlimited, Greensboro, NC.

A This is a common problem no matter where your landscape design/build business is located.

There will always be companies that provide “free plans” as a strategy to get installation work. One could argue this is no different than offering a 10% discount on a new installation.

Don’t get me wrong. Creating landscape plans for free, is bad business. It might get you a signed contract, but the chances of the work being profitable, the customer being satisfied, and the project coming out well are extremely slim.

There is no such thing as a “free” plan. The time it takes to create a design, present it to the client, and make revisions in hopes of getting the work, costs you, the contractor, a considerable amount of time and money.

Most contractors roll the cost of the plan into the installation estimate, thereby charging clients “full price” for their “free plan.” This is fine if you get the installation, but what about the other four or five “free plans” that didn’t turn into any work? Who pays for those drawings? You do.

There are many variables at work here, including the size of the property, the scope of the work, the amount of detail in the drawing and the proximity of the project in relationship from your office.

During the typical design/sales process, contractors can expect to spend about 20 hours creating a

free plan. That’s half of an average workweek (or one-third of a landscape contractor’s workweek).

I’ve listed the basic steps of the design/process below, including average times for each step. Keep in mind that each step includes drive time to and from the office.

Initial meeting: 2-3 hours

Site analysis: 1-2 hours

Concept plan: 3-4 hours

Estimate: 3-4 hours

Client presentation: 1-2 hours

Plan revisions: 2-3 hours

Estimate revisions: 2-3 hours

Client presentation: 1-2 hours

Total: 15-23 hours

To dissuade clients from working with a free plan, the best thing that you can do is educate them on the value of working with your design team and installation crews. Explain how you will work closely with them to make sure the design and installation are exactly what they envisioned, and how a landscape plan is the least expensive, but most important part of any landscape installation. Compare the benefits of hiring a professional company such as yours versus the potential pitfalls of working with a company that provides free plans.

Clients willing to pay for a professional plan and go through the proper design process are typically a better clients. They are also the clients who usually increase the scope of work and their budgets during the design/build process — providing you with a more profitable project and a very satisfied customer.

By charging for plans and weeding out the “tire kickers,” you free up countless hours of wasted time. You can now use those 20 extra hours a week to keeping your paying customers satisfied. These satisfied clients will happily refer you to their friends and families, who in turn will expect to pay for their drawings.

Profiting from Design is a quarterly column from award winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the President of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.